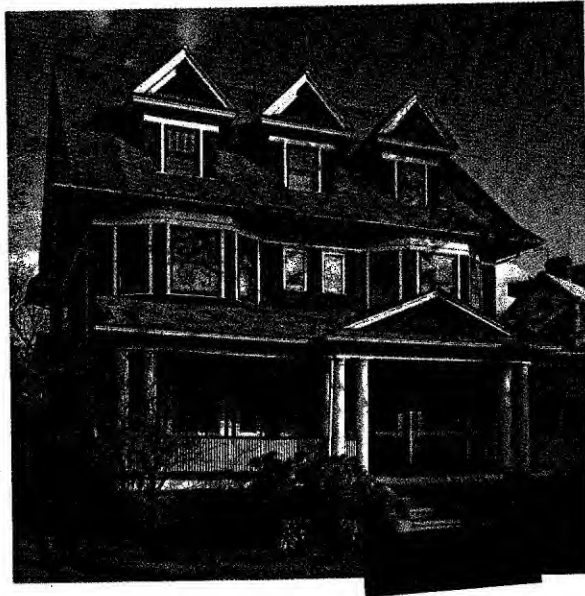


THE POPE'S MAN IN BROOKLYN: HOW BISHOP DAILY LEADS 1.6 MILLION NYC CATHOLICS

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## House Hunting in the County of Kings



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# DITMAS PARK

SOME ROOM TO GROW

W

hen I'm on my porch, sitting on my swing, with my plants," sighs Cindy Harden, "I'm in heaven." Harden loves her house, and who can blame her? It is situated in a community of three-story, turn-of-the-century homes with wraparound porches and grassy front lawns. It is a place where, when you move in, the neighborhood association comes to welcome you and gives you a plant. Oh, and it's smack dab in the middle of Brooklyn.

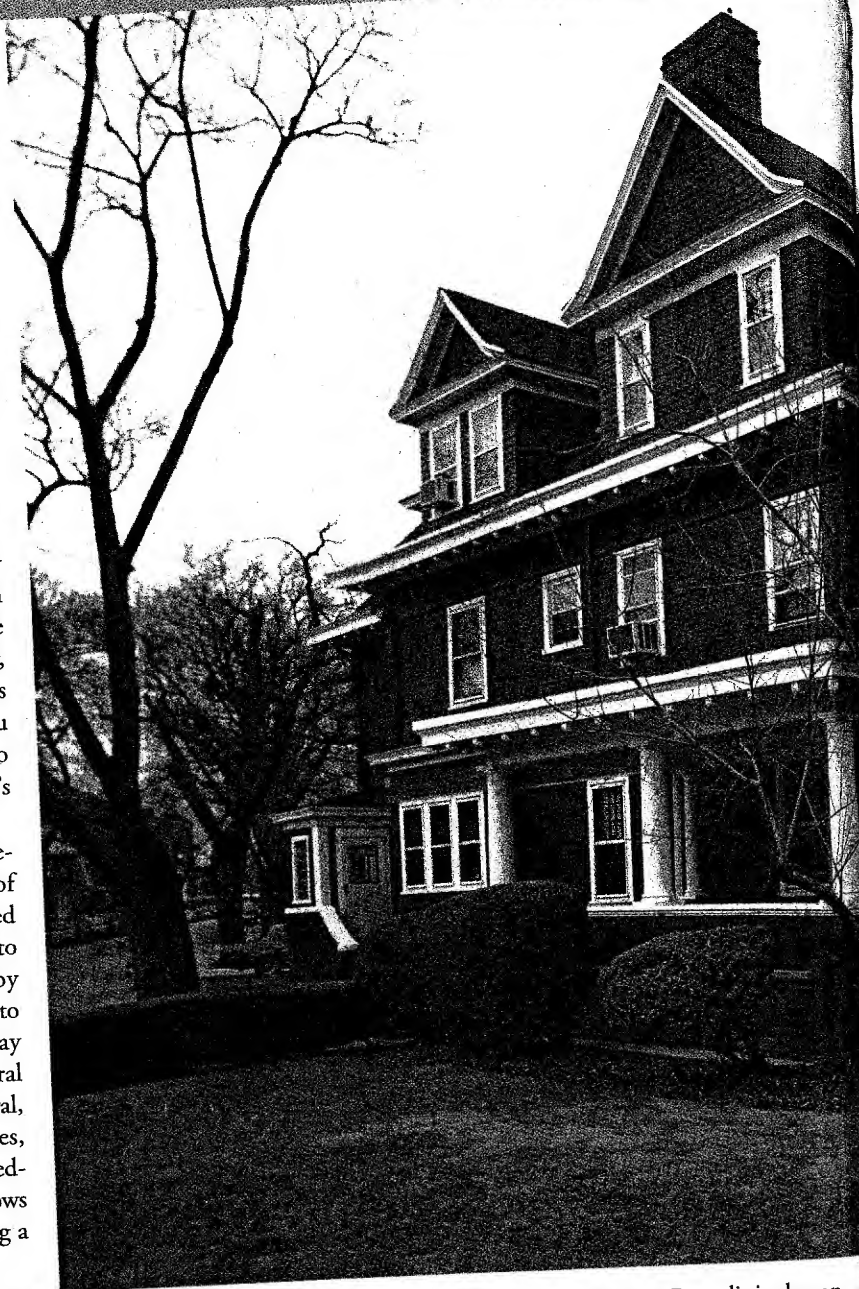
Ditmas Park is a small community of 175 free-standing, single-family homes located just north of Midwood. Occupying eight square blocks bisected by Ditmas Avenue, the neighborhood is bordered to the north by Dorchester Road, to the south by Newkirk Avenue, to the east by Ocean Avenue and to the west by East 16th Street and the BMT subway tracks. The houses come in a variety of architectural styles, from Queen Anne to Dutch Colonial Revival, and offer such amenities as big working fireplaces, driveways with garages and a *minimum* of five bedrooms (though the row of Arts and Crafts bungalows along East 16th Street are more modest, offering a mere four bedrooms.)

Developed in the first decade of this century, Ditmas Park was modeled on nearby Prospect Park South by builder Lewis Pounds and architects John Petit and Arlington Isham. In 1908, the Ditmas Park Association, the second-oldest neighborhood association in the country, enacted special zoning provisions to preserve the character of the neighborhood. It was designated as a historic district in 1987, and its residents are proud and fiercely protective of their landmarked homes.

Harden, a 43-year-old architect, has lived in Ditmas Park for six years, in a seven-bedroom Colonial Revival or "Victorian Flatbush" (the houses were built a tad too late to qualify as true

Victorians) with her 45-year-old husband, Don Bussolini, also an architect, and their five-year-old son. "When we looked over here at houses, we didn't know I was pregnant," says Harden. "We found out two days after we signed the contract for the house and moved in right before our son was born. Ours was the first baby on the block, but now there are six or seven."

Harden and her family were among the first arrivals in what is now a stampede of young families moving into the neighborhood. Right now, it's a seller's market, and many older residents whose children have grown and left the nest see this as an excellent time to





Low-Density  
Living: Single-  
family zoning  
and huge homes  
give Ditmas Park  
a feeling of  
spaciousness.

(Below) A new  
gourmet shop  
is a welcome  
addition to what  
some residents  
feel is a subpar  
commercial  
district.

unload their gargantuan houses, according to Realtor Mary Kay Gallagher, who has been selling homes in the area for 23 years.

Most new residents are coming in from other parts of Brooklyn but are not natives; almost all have lived in Manhattan at one time and needed to ease their way into the borough by living in Park Slope or Cobble Hill for a few years.

"People are coming in from the Slope because it is so expensive," explains Marge Brownstein, a real estate agent with 19 years of experience selling homes in Ditmas Park. "And then they discover that for a third less or even half the price of something in the Slope they can buy a huge house in a beautiful neighborhood."

Greg Addison, a 34-year-old lighting technician, and his wife, Kathleen Mobley, a 39-year-old costume designer, are the proud owners of a three-story Dutch Colonial Revival with seven bedrooms, a house that Addison sums up as being "just stupid big." So far they have only one child.

"We've filled every room in the house," confesses Addison. "My wife and I have a dressing room. My son has a playroom. I have an office, my wife has an office, we have a guest room." Unfortunately, this may be a case of too much of a good thing. "This

house is too big for my family," confesses Addison, although he is obviously smitten with it. "The upkeep is insane. We paid \$3,000 for heat the first year we lived here; it was a bad winter."

But getting so much house for your money is hard to resist, and with homes as grand as these, demand often gets ahead of supply. "There's only high-end houses available now," says Gallagher. "Every time I get a listing, I have a waiting list of twenty people."

The average price of a house in Ditmas Park today is between \$350,000 and \$400,000. Five years ago, it was around \$265,000, with nothing going for more than \$300,000. "The prices are just getting back up to where they were in the

late '80s, before the market fell in 1989," says Julie Kestyn, of Kestyn-Brisman Real Estate, who has lived in Ditmas Park for 23 years and sold houses there for 13.

Despite its provincial air, the neighborhood "has a real United Nations atmosphere," asserts Addison, "which we like, because we're a mixed-race couple."

"Pakistani, Vietnamese, Hispanic, Jewish, Italian, Irish, Jamaican, Haitian, African-American, Iranian," says Kestyn, listing the different ethnicities of the people she's sold houses to in the area. "I just had my first Egyptian client."

But let's get down to brass tacks—how's the commute? "It took moving in to realize it," says Addison, who is currently



## DITMAS PARK

working on a Denzel Washington movie being shot in Manhattan, "but the commute's not bad at all. The D/Q is a good line; I can be in Manhattan in half an hour on the train, and even faster by car, because of the Prospect Expressway."

For this new wave of "immigrants," the reputations of the local elementary schools were also an important factor. P.S. 217 and P.S. 139 both have federal magnet grants and gifted programs. Although Ditmas Park is zoned for 139, most parents choose to have their kids test into nearby 217 because it is a much smaller school with an active parents' association. P.S. 139, however, is involved in a new mini-school program, and is beginning to gain in popularity.

There is one shortcoming, however, that all Ditmas Parkers will admit to. When asked about the shopping in their area, invariably they sigh, "Well, it's no Seventh Avenue." The closest commercial districts are Newkirk Plaza, located at East 16th Street and Newkirk Avenue, and Cortelyou Road.

Newkirk Plaza, a shopping center built around the Newkirk Avenue subway station, is reputedly the second oldest shopping plaza of its kind in the country, developed around the same time as Ditmas Park. This spring, the plaza is slated to begin a \$1.1 million renovation, funded by the Transit Authority, the borough president's office and Assemblyman Jim Brennan's office.

Another sign that Newkirk Plaza is experiencing a rebirth: Konstantino Kormopoulos has recently opened an upscale gourmet food shop in the plaza, Konstantino & Vincenza, that features a cozy coffee bar and a few tables. "A lot of real-estate people come in with their clients to show them the store," says Kormopoulos. "It has become a selling point for the neighborhood."

Paul Goldman, who has owned Almac Service Star Hardware on Newkirk Plaza for 15 years, attributes recent increases in business to the new blood coming into the surrounding residential areas: "One thing I've noticed, with the younger generation coming in, both parents are working, so they want to shop near their

homes. Also, these new people know that to support local merchants is better for their neighborhood."

Cindy Harden says that the problem is not that there is no decent shopping in the area. "There's a good hardware store, a good florist, a good liquor store. There's bagels, two banks, an optometrist, a shoe store. The Associated Supermarket on Cortelyou was just renovated, and it's great. It's not the quality of the business district; it's the way it *looks*. You'll never have a Seventh Avenue here; there's not the population to support it. But so what? On Seventh Avenue everything is overpriced, and you can never find a parking space."

And space, after all, is the true heart of the matter. "Once you have a certain volume of space around you," explains Addison, "you realize how rare it is. It doesn't have to be fancy; you just need room to grow."

